

\* THE *Five* \*  
*Interpretations*  
of JESUS

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Five interpreta-  
tions of Jesus

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*The Five Interpretations of* JESUS

*Books by Abraham Mitrie Ribbany*

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SEVEN DAYS WITH GOD

FIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF JESUS

THE *Five*  
*Interpretations*  
of JESUS

By ABRAHAM M. RIHBANY



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TO THE  
FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH  
OF TOLEDO, OHIO  
AND THE  
CHURCH OF THE DISCIPLES, UNITARIAN  
OF BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

IN WHOSE SERVICES SUCCESSIVELY AS MINISTER  
I SPENT THIRTY-SEVEN HAPPY YEARS, AND  
WHOSE SINCERE APPRECIATION OF MY PULPIT  
DISCOURSES, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHICH DEAL  
WITH THE LIFE OF JESUS, HAS BEEN AN IN-  
SPIRATION TO ME AS A PREACHER AND AS AN  
AUTHOR

THIS VOLUME IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.



## *Preface*

THIS modest book is the outcome of five pulpit discourses which I delivered first during my ministry in the First Unitarian Church, in Toledo, Ohio; and, in more recent years, during my ministry in the Church of the Disciples (Unitarian), Boston, Massachusetts.

During my active ministry (I am now retired) of forty-two years, I could not — as a truth-seeker — but know that millions of men and women in our times have outgrown the traditional theology and are possessed of the desire — like me — to learn from modern scholars concerning the origin of our faith and our Bible, and the real history and teachings of Jesus.

Judging by past experience, and the fact that science is ever progressing, it may well be supposed that progress will not be toward the old tradition, but rather to a greater departure from it. The vision is forward and not back; and the quest is not what has been, but what is true and eternal.

It was the great number of demands from my own congregation, and other attendants of our

services, that led me to make the adventure and deliver the original discourses mentioned above — as a small contribution to the vast subject. The general public interest was more clearly revealed to me in that the audiences — through the whole series — were surprisingly larger than the usual. Along with this, a great number of my hearers inspired me with their kindly and earnest requests to ‘be sure and publish the whole series together in book form.’

Some of my brother ministers, and others — of the laity — assured me that such a ‘handy book,’ containing the essentials of its great subject, could not fail to be well received by the liberal-minded public, and especially by both teachers and classes of young and old in the ‘Departments of Religious Education’ which are established in many churches. My sincere thanks to my generous advisers!

I have made the adventure — encouraged by them — and written and published this ‘handy book,’ with amplifications and other additions to the original Discourses. I earnestly hope that it will prove to be to its readers not only a welcome introduction to a wide field of religious and historical study, but an incentive to further research, with an open mind.

I have sincerely endeavored to avoid all pugil-



istic theological and sectarian arguments. My purpose has been to implore all those who bear the precious name 'Christian' — regardless of sect — earnestly to heed the call of modern scholarship, whose purpose is to clarify our vision, rid us of mythical doctrines, make us more intelligent as thinkers, and, by revealing to us the truth of our religion, make us more loyal, and more devout as worshipers and philanthropists.

Modern scholars have pierced through all obsolete traditions concerning the theological Christ, and opened the way for us to the real, loving Jesus — Master and Friend of men. So, with the way open, let us come to Jesus and walk with him the way of true life, as our supreme and holy Teacher of the purest religion — Love to God and love to man — who assures us of our own divine sonship: 'Ye are the children of God.' 'Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.'

ABRAHAM M. RIEBANY



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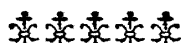
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JESUS  
OF  
NAZARETH  
*The Prophet*



## JESUS OF NAZARETH *The Prophet*

THE Hebrew word 'prophet' has two meanings. It means 'Roeh,' a man of vision of the deep things of God; and 'Nabi,' a proclaimer of the things he sees. He is a man who speaks from God, to warn, to console, sometimes to foretell.

'The central force in the history of Israel was the prophetic spirit. The prophetic writings embodied great principles both of belief and practice, a high conception — gradually becoming still higher and purer — of the being and character of God, and a growing stringency and elevation in the sense of His moral and spiritual demands upon man.' <sup>1</sup>

Now, whenever there was a long interval when no prophet appeared in Israel, the people wondered whether God had forsaken them. The voices of the prophets had long been silent when John the Baptist appeared, crying, 'Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' He was a stern ascetic and dweller of the wilderness. This preacher of repentance wished to

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics.*

terrify and humble the sinful masses and their arrogant leaders in Judea. The people flocked to him eager to hear a man who spoke from God — a prophet — and to be baptized by him. One of that host was Jesus of Nazareth of Galilee, the son of Joseph, a carpenter, and Mary. That was the first appearance of Jesus.

Jesus must have seen in the Baptist a great character and an unrivaled prophet. This is indicated in his saying, 'Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist.' <sup>1</sup> To be baptized by such a man was to Jesus a suitable start for his ministry. After his baptism, he retired for self-examination — known as the Temptation — to the remoter, barren wilderness of Judea. When he heard that the Baptist had been 'delivered up,' that is, thrown into prison by Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, who finally beheaded the fiery prophet,<sup>2</sup> Jesus returned to Galilee, the main theater of his future work. There he began his preaching with the Baptist's cry, 'Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven [that is, God] is at hand.'

Now, whether if John had been permitted to continue in his work as a preacher of the King-

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 11: 11.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 14: 3 ff.



dom Jesus, who so esteemed the great Baptist and felt a deep, sympathetic interest in his work, would have remained as one of his disciples and become a fellow worker with him, never can be told. But it might be reasonably assumed that those two prophets could not have worked harmoniously together. It is true that each of them knew himself a prophet, a 'voice' of God and a herald of the Kingdom. But John was too untrained to see far into the complexities of character, and to understand human nature. His utterances were those of a stern ascetic, an inhabitant of the wilderness who spoke with the fieriness of an Elijah. His penitential sermon inspired his hearers with fear more than confidence. When he saw many of the Pharisees coming to his baptism, he addressed them, 'Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'<sup>1</sup> In other words, John's was not a winsome personality. It did not win the hearts and inflame the imagination of the masses; nor did it awaken their enthusiastic admiration. Hence, it is easy to see why he never became the center of any miraculous legends.

What the Baptist lacked Jesus richly possessed. He won the hearts of many, because he

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 3:7.

brought them a clarified vision, a confirmed will, and a great heart firm in faith and warm with love. His sermon was more elevating than humiliating, bringing bliss more than terror. It was the expression of his own heart and not a wrestling with legalistic questions. His hearers could not fail to get the impression that something new had appeared. They saw in Jesus a new teacher by the grace of God, 'who spoke with authority and not as the scribes.' And they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet is arisen among us; and God has visited his people.'<sup>1</sup> So did Jesus know himself, a prophet. There can be no doubt that that inner circle of disciples the young Teacher gathered around him at least hoped that he was the expected Messiah who was soon to conquer the enemies of his people, 'restore the kingdom to Israel,' and establish their rule over the heathen nations. But Jesus himself more than once warned those disciples, saying, 'Say to no man that I am the Christ' (Messiah).

Nor, according to the older strata of the Gospels, such as in Mark, did Jesus claim in his public preaching any special office or function such as that associated with the word 'Messiah.' Nor did he, during his lifetime,

<sup>1</sup> Luke 7:16.

permit his followers in their preaching to ascribe to him any such rank. The authority which he claimed for his words and deeds was that of the Holy Spirit of God. In all his teaching there is no mention of the victory of the Jewish nation over the heathen and the revenge on these enemies.

From a historical standpoint, it is certain that Jesus was not conscious of any superhuman nature or origin. He appeared as a prophet, as the Baptist had before him. He felt himself to be Son of God in no other than the moral-religious sense. What he claimed for himself he claimed for other men, and he called upon them to be like their Heavenly Father. As he prayed to God as to a father, he taught his disciples to pray, 'Our Father.' Jesus was no philosophér. He taught no abstract doctrines. In the Sermon on the Mount, he applies the title 'Father' to God no less than fifteen times, very suggestively. He ascribes to Him by implication a universal and a special providence,<sup>1</sup> benignant in its action, doing good even to the unthankful and the evil; a perfect ethical nature whose perfection consists in gracious love, a spirit delighting in mercy and ready to forgive, and desiring the same spirit

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 5:45; 6:32.

to rule in the hearts of men who have the glory in being called God's children.<sup>1</sup> Jesus taught his doctrine of man on the same method as that of his doctrine of God. Man's incomparable dignity in the teaching of Jesus rests on the fact that man is not merely a creature but a son of God; a son indefeasibly, whether good or evil, just or unjust.<sup>2</sup> Yea, his soul outweighs the world: 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?'<sup>3</sup>

So Jesus' preaching of the universal fatherhood of God and the divine sonship of man outflows, in eloquent simplicity, from a deep conviction that with his earthly part, and notwithstanding his imperfections, man carries within him something transcendent and divine. 'It is the spirit of your Father that speaketh in you.' In spite of all the evils men do, man is essentially good. The consciousness of his relation of sonship to God awakens in man fresh affections, calls forth energies hitherto unrealized, and aspiration after the divine likeness. It was this aspiration to be 'like our Heavenly Father' that formed Jesus' major theme in speaking to his disciples, as to joint

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 6:14 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 5:45.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:36-37.

heirs with him. He never preached 'down' to them. He was confident that they were able to respond to his appeals, and prove their being sons of God by doing the Father's will. He classed them and all men with himself in his saying, 'Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.'<sup>1</sup> He called those commoners the light of the world, and the salt of the earth. He was so confident of man's spiritual potentialities that he said to his hearers, 'Be ye perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.'<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' disciples felt and acknowledged his superiority as their Master (teacher). But he, with noble humility, said to them, 'I am among you as he that serveth.' And when there was a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest, he said to them, 'Whosoever of you would be the chiefest shall be the servant of all.'<sup>3</sup> The Kingdom Jesus proclaimed was not the kingdom of David, but the Kingdom of God, the pearl of great price, which is the natural inheritance of men, if they would only seek it; if they would repent, abandon all that hinders, take the right direction, and, like the Prodigal Son, go home.

<sup>1</sup> Mark 3:35.<sup>2</sup> Matt. 5:48.<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:44.

No supernatural change of nature is called for; and no mediator between a penitent son and his loving, merciful father is required.

Jesus never speaks of man as a fallen and helpless thing, an heir of Adam's sin and curse, nor of 'original sin.' He never dreamed that the 'infallible' Church which bears his name would declare at the baptism of every child that 'all men are conceived and born in sin.' It would seem as if the young prophet of Galilee never heard of that discredited 'father' of the race, else he would have informed his disciples that 'in Adam's fall, we sinned all.' It is strange, indeed, that in all his teachings Jesus gives not a hint of that network of dogmas which the Church of later ages set up in his name, as necessary to 'salvation,' through a redeeming Lord. The true salvation he preached is not obtained through belief in so many dogmas, nor vicariously through a redeeming Lord. It means the fulfillment of the life-purpose of the individual — the realization of the divine will.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that the true sons of God and enfranchised of His Kingdom are not those who have the longest list of exclusive beliefs, but 'the poor in spirit (who feel their spiritual needs)

... the meek (that is, humble-minded)... the hungry and thirsty for righteousness... the merciful... the peacemakers... those that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake.' But the individual's right of citizenship in the Kingdom carries with it a supreme obligation which such a citizen must actively assume if his life-purpose is to be completely fulfilled. He must not bury his treasure in the ground, nor put his light under a bushel. In modern language, he must think and live socially, philanthropically. He must reject that egoism which forever seeks its own, even at the cost of others, and find his richest and permanent satisfaction in that self-forgetting love which seeks the fulfillment of God's will in the service of humanity.

Jesus' doctrine of man's filial relation to God and his fraternal relation to his fellow men puts religion and morality on the same level. It makes them one. To the man who asked him, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' Jesus answered, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these

two commandments hang all the Law, and the prophets.' <sup>1</sup> Thus, love to God and love to man are of equal importance. To be mindful of our duty to God, and unconcerned about our duties to our fellow men, is to put asunder what God has joined together. 'Therefore,' says Jesus, 'if thou art offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.' <sup>2</sup> In his First Epistle, <sup>3</sup> Saint John complements Jesus' admonition in his own trenchant words: 'If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, cannot love God whom he hath not seen.'

In Jesus' making those two commandments the dynamics of the good and true life, individual and social, there is, indeed, a religious-ethical truth for all time. Love to God and man turns commands into privileges: the endurance of hardness is lightened by the soul's trustful, life-giving aspiration in the worship of God, and by the sacrificial adventures of love in the service of man. Jesus stood, and will forever stand, as the supreme representa-

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 22:35 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 5:23.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:20.



tive of all who live pure, sacrificial, and therefore redemptive lives. His superiority does not isolate him from the rest of mankind. It is rather a luminous revelation of what is native to our own nature. He made no claim that he was miraculously born, nor that he was God's only Son. He spoke of God as 'my Father and your Father, my God and your God.' Nor would he be called unqualifiedly good. When one addressed him 'good Master,' he answered: 'Why callest thou me good? none is good save one, even God.'<sup>1</sup> He knew himself as a prophet who had a great mission to his people, but claimed no uniqueness. He worked as a teacher and healer among his own people, like other predecessors and contemporaries. When on one occasion he healed a man (supposed to be) possessed with a demon, the Pharisees said, 'This man does not cast demons, but by Beelzebub the prince of demons.' Jesus answered: 'If I by Beelzebub cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges.'<sup>2</sup> Here we have clear evidence that, as a healer, Jesus thought he was no different essentially from other healers among his people; both he and they healed by the spirit of God.

<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:18.<sup>2</sup> Matt. 12:24 ff.

Did Jesus' ministry extend over one year or three years? is a familiar question. The first three gospels (the Synoptics) represent it as extending over one year and as being carried out in Galilee. John's gospel, which is more doctrinal than historical, makes it extend over three years, and gives Jerusalem and the neighborhood as its scene. The question is of purely historical significance. Whether the ministry lasted one or three years, its spiritual treasure is secure. To me the one-year statement is the correct one. It seems to me that Jesus' powerful religious and political enemies, who from the beginning considered him a dangerous heretic and seditious, and later drove him to the cross, could not have permitted him to continue to preach his subversive doctrines for three years, while they were able to rid themselves of him at the time the first three gospels say those bitter enemies did.

So far as external circumstances are concerned, Jesus' ministry was an unhappy one. At the very beginning of his work in Galilee, he was encountered by formidable opponents. First the rabbinical cult, a creation of the Pharisees, whose business was to interpret and reinterpret every word in the Law. After their return from their exile, the Jews entered upon

a new period in their religious evolution. The chief thing was their belief that they were driven into exile by their enemies, because they had been unfaithful in their observance of the Law of the Lord. So in order to redeem a sinful past, and lay the foundation for a glorious future, the temple was rebuilt, intercourse with the Gentiles strictly forbidden and a rigid demand made for the observance of every precept of the Law. This required that not only every commandment but every word of the Law be carefully set forth and exhaustively interpreted. The rabbinical cult depended on scholarly knowledge of the letter of the Law. To them only the person who knew the Law, word for word, and all its innumerable interpretations could be righteous.

They expounded the Law in such a way that it contained no less than six hundred and thirteen prohibitions. The ordinary man could hardly exercise a function of his being without breaking the Law; and sinning in one, he sinned in all. To the common people the demands of the Law became 'burdens grievous to be borne.' Religion to them became, on its theoretical side, a network of puzzling technicalities and, on its practical side, slavish external observances. They simply gave up in

despair. As a result, a wide gulf yawned between them and the Pharisees. These stood aloof from those rabble who, because they did not know the Law, stood on the same level with the heathen and with the publicans and sinners. The Pharisees called them 'accursed.'<sup>\*</sup> Soon after his appearance in Galilee, Jesus cast his lot with the outcasts, the poor, the ignorant (of the Law), and all that the Pharisees called 'accursed.' For that, he faced the most glorious accusation ever urged against a reformer: that he was 'the friend of publicans and sinners.' But here was a liberating force. He reawakened the strains of prophetic Judaism in a higher key, uttered the precepts of the great prophets in a sweeter spirit, and gave them wider applications. Like them, he taught that God 'rejoiced not in sacrifices of beasts, and in moons and sabbaths. He would have mercy and not sacrifice.'

To the Heavenly Father none of his children are accursed. The Great Giver showers His healing blessings upon all, the evil and the good, regardless of rank or station. As a true Son of God, Jesus would do 'his Father's works.' His first purpose was to awaken the individual to the supreme worth of his soul,

<sup>\*</sup> John 7:48.

and the fulfillment of his life-purpose without the yoke of the Law. He did not advocate the abrogation of the Law. He only appealed from its letter to its original purpose, which he held was the benefit of man. The Law, like the Sabbath, was made for man. It is in this sense that he says, 'Think not that I am come to destroy the Law: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.' From this it is not difficult to see that to Jesus the fulfillment of man's life-purpose, both individually and socially, meant the fulfillment of the Law. And whenever the letter of the Law contradicted its original purpose, the letter must be ignored.

Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus did not wait for the people to come to him; he went to them. Treading the dusty roads of Galilee, he went about preaching in synagogues, at private houses, on hilltops, at the seashore, and wherever else he could find hearers. The harried Galileans heard him gladly. He appealed everywhere to familiar ideas, and coined no new terms. His magnetic personality, the fact that he was one of their own people and spoke their own dialect, his plain words and simple parables, all captivated them. His assuring them that they were children of God, and his firm faith that God will soon redeem His

people, inspired them with hope and self-confidence. Those poor, simple fishermen, farmers, and slum-dwellers saw through the gloom of their wretchedness a new light and heard a voice speaking to them words of comfort and encouragement. A spark disturbed their clod. They felt that in spite of their condemnation by the Pharisees, their souls were of worth to God, and that they had something to live for as heirs of the Kingdom.

Now, notwithstanding Jesus' protestations that he had come not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it, to the Pharisees and the sacrificial cult he was a heretic and a rebel. His teaching rendered the literal observance of the Law, on which they insisted, all but senseless. He taught that only repentance alone without sacrifices made one eligible for entrance into the Kingdom of God, and called the pure in heart and the peacemakers sons of God. His designating those ignorant fishermen and peasants, whom the Pharisees despised because they knew not the Law, the light of the world and salt of the earth, was to the guardians of the Law damnable heresy. Furthermore, he denounced the rich in his saying, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom

of God,'<sup>1</sup> and commanded them to sell their possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. This angered not only the rich but the sacrificial cult, also. The elaborate equipment of the Temple, with its priests and Levites, its multitude of sacrifices, and its pompous, costly displays, all depended upon wealth for their maintenance. Therefore the moneyed class and the priests consolidated their forces against the dangerous young prophet.

The second force which confronted Jesus in Galilee was the party of ardent patriots called Zealots. The tyranny of the Roman rulers of that province was intolerable. The crushing pressure of taxes, the arrogance of the aristocracy, the poor man's lack of rights, and other injustices called the Zealot party into being. To them submission to the foreign tyrant was sinful servitude. Therefore, they advocated war to the death against the oppressor for the establishment of the divine kingdom. They went about in the land attacking isolated Roman garrisons, murdering Roman sympathizers, fighting, dying, all to realize their purpose in setting their people free from the tyranny of a relentless enemy. Just imagine how they must have felt when they heard Jesus, a prophet of

<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:25.

their own blood, say to them: 'Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you. . . . As ye would that men should do to you do ye likewise to them.' He even told them to pay taxes to Caesar. Could he be to them any other than a traitor and hateful Roman sympathizer? Beset with such religious and political enemies, Jesus in the end found it unsafe for him to live in Galilee. He was rejected even by his own family. For 'neither did his brothers believe in him.'<sup>1</sup> In speaking to his disciples of the trials that awaited them he said, 'And you will be betrayed even by your parents and your brothers and kinsmen and friends.'<sup>2</sup> After his flight to the north of Galilee, into the regions of Tyre and Sidon and Caesarea Philippi, he made his fatal journey to Jerusalem, the seat of his bitterest enemies.

Thus far we have learned from the older gospels that Jesus was a man who never claimed to be a superhuman being. He trod the way of life with his followers as a teacher who 'allured to brighter worlds, and led the way.' But we learn from history that his later followers, Hellenistic Jews, who after his death had gone out to the Gentiles and there derived the essen-

<sup>1</sup> John 5:7.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 21:16.



tials of their theology from pagan sources, made of the humble Nazarene a transcendent God endowed with omnipotence and omniscience. But according to Mark, the oldest gospel, Jesus had his human limitations. In his book, *How to Understand the Gospels* (p. 48), Anthony C. Deane, Canon of Windsor, says: 'Saint Mark is not afraid to attribute human limitations to our Lord; He feels grief, anger, surprise, amazement, fatigue; He asks questions for information; at times He is unable to do what He wills.' When we compare this with the theology of the Hellenistic followers mentioned above, we find that it was their thought that was read back into the mind of Jesus, and it was their mythical theology that overlaid his historical sayings and obscured his essential human nature. Again as child of his time, Jesus shared the beliefs of his contemporaries, which history has proven to be erroneous. He believed that certain types of sickness were demonical possessions. He said, 'I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.'<sup>1</sup> Like the Baptist, he held that the Kingdom was at hand. Was it an omniscient being who said it was to come 'before that generation passed away'?<sup>2</sup> That generation has passed away, and

<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:18.<sup>2</sup> Mark 13:30.

many others after it, and the Kingdom has not yet come.

Jesus' going from Galilee to Jerusalem, the stronghold of priestly power and persecuting orthodoxy, was, as he at the last moment realized, a miscalculated adventure. The claim that he voluntarily made it that he might die upon the cross as a ransom for humanity is wrong. It is contradicted by Jesus' acts when he felt that 'his hour had come.' In trying to escape from the city in the night he fled with his disciples, some of whom had swords, as he had ordered, to a wooded place in the Mount of Olives, called Gethsemane. There he said to them, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; tarry ye here, and watch with me.'<sup>1</sup> His plan of escape was foiled by his betrayer, who led Jesus' enemies to his hiding-place and caused his arrest. All the disciples left him and fled.

Now, the fact that Jesus made such strenuous efforts to escape a cruel fate, the fact that he thrice prayed with bloody sweat, 'O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me,' and that (when this petition was not answered, and he was nailed to the cross) he cried with unspeakable agony: 'My God! My God! Why

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 26:38.

hast Thou forsaken me?' all show that Jesus neither sought death upon the cross, nor was an omnipotent and omniscient being. There ended the career of the prophet of Nazareth. He lived his maturer years as a teacher of the deep things of God. As a true Son of God, he was a devoted lover of humanity. He walked with men as a great, inspiring Companion.

What Jesus would have been and done had he lived to the ripe old age of Buddha, or even to Mohammed's age, which was twice that of Jesus', never can be told. What we do know, and shall see more clearly in the following parts of this book, is that after his death other minds than his own, and than the minds of those who actually lived and labored with him in the flesh, sought to fix his place in history.



JESUS  
OF  
BETHLEHEM  
*The Messiah*



## JESUS OF BETHLEHEM *The Messiah*

BEFORE trying to trace the development of the messianic idea in our Bible, it should be noted — to the credit of human nature — that the messianic hope is not peculiar to the Jewish-Christian religion. Certainly this is not to be regretted. It shows that even in the depth of woe, the moral consciousness of man never gives up the belief in the ultimate triumph of truth and righteousness over all evil.

In all great religions the belief is expressed that whenever this world falls a prey to hatred, injustice, war, the righteous Power that rules the universe sends a leader who shall guide men in the way of salvation, put an end to all destructive forces, and establish a new, divine order (the Kingdom of God). I will present very briefly only two parallels to our scriptural story of Jesus' messiahship:

(1) From Persia. The god Ormazd, who has his throne in the endless light of heaven, is himself light, life, and the soul of all that is pure and good. Seeing that man had been

smitten with blindness and ignorance, and allowed himself easily to be ensnared by the craft of the evil powers who seek to ruin his future existence, Ormazd graciously determined to open the eyes of mankind by sending a prophet to show them the right way of salvation. To this end he chose and sent Zoroaster on the sacred mission. Like Jesus, Zoroaster believed that the kingdom was at hand, and hoped along with his disciples to live to witness its coming.

(2) The Babylonian parallel, which is even more striking than the preceding one. Here it is said that wars and other calamities 'must be' before the coming of the conquering Messiah: seacoast will rise against seacoast, Elamite against Elamite, Cassite against Cassite, country against country, house against house, man against man. Brother is to show no mercy toward brother; they shall kill one another. This is to continue until 'after a time' the Akkadian will come, overthrow all, and conquer them all. This is a foretelling of the coming of the great king Hammurabi, who was to open a golden age of peace; which the mighty ruler did, in 'the fullness of time.'

Now compare this with the passage in Mark 13:7-13, and wonder. Here we have it that

when his disciples were wondering when the end of the present order was to come, Jesus counseled them not to be deceived and said: 'When ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars, be not troubled; for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.... The brother shall betray the brother to death, and the father the son... and ye shall be hated by all men; but he that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved.' Having in mind the many influences Babylon exerted upon the Jews, and the striking resemblance between the two pronouncements before us, it is conceivable that the passage in Mark is of Babylonian ancestry.

In tracing the development of the messianic idea in the Old Testament, we find that up to the time of David, a period of about six hundred years, the Hebrews had no thought of a Messiah. The tribes followed Moses to the promised land believing that Jehovah was their real captain, and Moses His spokesman. From Moses to Aaron, to Joshua, and through the period of the Judges, the Israelites lived a semi-tribal life. As tribes they were only loosely related to one another. Something like anarchy prevailed among them. 'In those days there



was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.' <sup>1</sup> 'Then the elders of Israel said to Samuel, now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.' <sup>2</sup> As an answer to the people's call, and at the Lord's command, Samuel anointed Saul, the son of Kish, king over Israel.

Anointing with consecrated oil, applied to the crown of the head like an ointment, is a very ancient rite. In Hebrew the word 'anoint' is *mashach*, hence the title Messiah (anointed one). Its Greek equivalent is *Christ*, which is used in the New Testament. In Israel the anointing of kings represented the formal investiture with an office that was regarded as sacred. But the act indicated, besides the purely formal investiture, the actual transfer of divine powers to the person anointed. He became 'the Lord's anointed,' a son of God by adoption. Thus in Psalm 2:7-9, the newly anointed king is represented as saying in his (in modern language) inaugural address, as a threat to the heathen nations: 'I will tell the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for

<sup>1</sup> Judges 17:6.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Sam. 8:5.

thy possession; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.'

Saul was a great warrior. He won many victories for his people, which brought a closer union between the tribes and awakened in them national consciousness. But Saul was no organizer. He had no capital city and no system of government. His reign was short. He became mentally deranged, and lost his life in battle with his old enemies.

David was anointed king in place of the unfortunate Saul. He reigned over forty years. With a mighty arm he subdued the enemies of his people, took Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made it his capital. Under him for the first time Israel had a capital city, a central government, a standing army, and a court of law. It was, then, no wonder that later Israel looked back to David as the ideal man and king, and made him the type of the ideal head of the Messianic Age.

Solomon succeeded his father David. He was more of a statesman than a warrior. His reign was brilliant, but it proved distasteful to agricultural Israel. His vast designs, his imperial court, and his multitude of wives and concubines required for their maintenance heavy taxes, to which the people were not accus-

tomed. Furthermore, Solomon's friendliness toward foreign nations and his entering into alliances with them threatened the exclusiveness of Israel — God's chosen people. The kingdom began to totter under him, and after his death was split into two parts, the Northern Kingdom with Samaria as its capital, and the Southern Kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital. The two kingdoms passed through frightful periods of internal dissensions and foreign wars. Now, the more painful those experiences became, especially in Judea, the more sentimental grew the backward look to the great reign of David, and the keener the desire for a king like him — a prince-messiah of the house of David.

The fall of the kingdom was followed by the exile. This experience, as has been said in Part I, was interpreted as a visitation of wrath upon Israel because they had not observed the Law of the Lord faithfully. So the expected Messiah was to be not only a great military leader, but a faithful observant and guardian of the Law. He was to bring the reign of righteousness into a great Israelitish kingdom.\* But the exile had other effects. Israel's contacts with the great empires of the East

\* Isa. 61:4 ff.

changed their views of the heathen nations. These were not to be 'dashed in pieces' upon the advent of the Messiah. They were to 'flow unto the mountain of the Lord, the house of the God of Jacob, learn His ways and walk in his paths. . . . They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.'<sup>1</sup>

A second modification of the messianic idea in post-exilic Israel was due to the dualism of the universe, which the Israelites derived from Zoroastrianism. This meant that Satan, the adversary of God and God's people, had a kingdom of his own in this universe. So the expected Messiah was not only to subdue Israel's enemies but to destroy Satan and his kingdom. To this end, the Messiah was to be endowed with superhuman powers equal to his task. Later, when the Romans ruled and greatly oppressed Israel, the chosen people cried for a deliverer, a son of David, of the town of Bethlehem, who should conquer their oppressors and 'restore the kingdom to Israel.' In all this there is no mystery and no miracle. It was brought about by the Israelites' faith

<sup>1</sup> Isa. 2:2-4.

in God, and their historical necessities. After Moses they longed for a leader like him; in the period of the Judges, for a judge; after David, for a king like him; after the exile, for a priest-king to regenerate the nation; after acquiring the belief in Satan, for a conqueror of that evil being; under the tyrannical Romans, for a deliverer.

Now, to state it briefly, Jesus, a village carpenter from half-heathen Galilee — a preacher with a small following of fishermen and peasants — could not measure up to the requirements set down for the hero — a prince of the house of David — of whom Israel dreamed. The nation as a whole rejected the Nazarene.

Jesus' real triumph and his wondrously enduring influence came after his death. The disciples who deserted him in the dread hour of Calvary, and who had followed him in the first place because they believed he was the Messiah, trembled at the thought that he was dead, and that they were to live the rest of their lives without him. In their extremity, and owing to the profound impression his supernal personality and his teaching made upon them when he walked and talked with them, they refused to believe that he was not to

come to life again. As his apostles they would continue his work and await his return.

The Twelve and their followers returned to Jerusalem, where, because they believed the Messiah had come, they were known to their fellow Jews as a messianic sect. And for their believing that Jesus was the Messiah, their community was called 'the Synagogue of the Nazarenes.' They lived as a communistic brotherhood. They preached no new religion, nor did they seek heathen followers. All they desired was to be a Messiah-believing nucleus of the Jewish people, and to convert the whole nation, to whom the promise belonged. They felt themselves bound by the Mosaic Law as the basis of the Jewish religion. They were called <sup>2</sup> 'zealous of the Law'; that is, most strict in their observance.

But those Nazarenes soon found themselves confronted with a great task. The success of their mission depended upon their success in proving to their people that Jesus was the Messiah. How were they to convince them that the Galilean prophet, who during his ministry took no interest in the struggles of the Jews to rid themselves of their tyrannical, alien rulers, and who was ignominiously

<sup>2</sup> Acts 21:20.

scourged and finally put to death by those enemies, was 'the Lord's anointed' who was to free Israel and restore the kingdom of 'our father David'?

Now, the apostles could not satisfactorily prove their claim that Jesus was the Messiah from their own knowledge of his teaching. They did not always understand him; and that led him at times to say to them, 'Are ye also without understanding?' He also charged them to say to no man that he was the Christ. So other proofs had to be sought. For such helps they turned to Old Testament passages, which they erroneously applied to Jesus. Yes, he suffered, but his suffering was divinely fore-ordained. They applied to him what Isaiah said of suffering Israel in exile — six hundred years before — when the righteous suffered for the wicked. But righteous Israel was to return, rebuild the 'captive daughter of Zion,' and make it the joy of the whole earth.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus truly died, but, said the apostles, death had no dominion over him. He rose on the third day and ascended to heaven, whence he was to return and establish his kingdom. They asserted that they had seen him after his resurrection and witnessed his ascension. Now, re-

<sup>1</sup> Isa. 52, 53.

urrection from the dead was a Jewish doctrine, and ascension to heaven was not an entirely strange thing to that people. They already had the legend of Enoch's translation to heaven, because 'he walked with God.'<sup>1</sup> This is presented in Hebrews 11:5: 'By faith Enoch was translated, that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him; for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.' Elijah also was carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire.<sup>2</sup> If, as the apostles believed, Jesus was captive of death for only two days, rose on the third day and ascended to heaven, the two other personages just mentioned ascended without their having been captives of death for even such a short time. In either case, however, the 'miracle' is one of admiration and pious fancy.

So far as I know, Biblical scholars accept as truth the claim of the disciples to having had visions of the Master after his death. But the scholars agree that those visions were purely subjective and not objective. The ineffaceable impression Jesus made upon his disciples while with them seems to have penetrated much more deeply than they were conscious of. His actual presence only half revealed the ideal that was

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 5:24.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 2:11.



behind it. It is a fact of human experience that we never have full ideal or spiritual possession of those great embodiments of excellence whom our eyes see and our hands touch until we lose them. Then what the empirical only partly suggests, the ideal fully reveals. It illuminates the memory and gives freer and stronger wings to the imagination. The disciples, being children of the poetical and dreamy East (and here, as their fellow countryman, I know whereof I speak), were brought up in the world of the miraculous. It was easy for them to dream dreams and to see visions.

Now, to justify their belief in Jesus' return, they turned to Daniel's apocalypse. Does not that prophet say, 'I saw in the night visions, and, behold, there came with the clouds of heaven one like unto a son of man, and he came to the ancient of days... and there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him'?<sup>1</sup> The title 'son of man' was applied to Jesus and interpreted so as to mean uniqueness. But the fact is that in the three principal Semitic languages, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic — my mother tongue — 'son of man' means a human being. The two phrases

<sup>1</sup> Dan. 7:13-14.

'son of man' and 'son of Adam' are interchangeable. Daniel applies the title to himself: 'He said unto me, understand, O son of man; for the vision belongeth to the time of the end.'<sup>1</sup> In chapters 2-44 of his book, Ezekiel uses the title 'son of man' some ninety times, always as the term by which the Lord addressed him: 'And he said unto me, son of man, stand upon thy feet. . . . Son of man, be not afraid . . . Son of man, hear what I say. . . . Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel,' and so on to the end. In the often quoted lines,<sup>2</sup> 'What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?' the poet author uses 'son of man' as a variant of 'man.' Jesus uses the same form in his saying, 'The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: so that the son of man is lord even of the sabbath.'<sup>3</sup>

But a greater difficulty beset the Jerusalem Christians. Their idea of a Galilean messiah, especially of the vile city of Nazareth, was to the devout Jewish mind utterly unsurmountable. 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?' 'Hath not the Scripture said that Christ cometh of the seed of David, and from

<sup>1</sup> Dan. 8:17.<sup>2</sup> Ps. 8:4.<sup>3</sup> Mark 2:27, 28.

Bethlehem, the village where David was?'<sup>1</sup> Such were the circumstances which determined the construction of the genealogy found in our Gospel of Matthew, whose first aim was not to claim a supernatural birth for the Messiah, for this the Jews never expected, but to prove that Joseph, the father of Jesus, was a descendant of David. It was further necessary, in order that he might be accepted as of the Davidic line, that Jesus should be son of Joseph. Mary was not a descendant of David; she was a cousin of Elisabeth, who was of the daughters of Aaron.<sup>2</sup>

But all this could not have been done while the disciples were yet living. They also were of Galilee and knew their Master as the son of Joseph and Mary and a citizen of Nazareth. Thus Peter spoke of him at Pentecost: 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you.'<sup>3</sup> From these evidences and many others, Biblical scholars conclude that the earliest genealogy out of which Matthew's account of Jesus' birth grew could not have been made during the lifetime of the disciples. And as to the Gospel of Matthew as we now have it, Arthur C. McGiffert says: 'There is no hint in the work itself that it was produced by a

<sup>1</sup> John 7:42.<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:5, 36.<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:22.

personal disciple of Jesus, who was an eye-witness of the events recorded. . . . Our first gospel, in fact, is evidently from the pen of a Christian of the second or third generation.' <sup>1</sup>

Now, since the tradition of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem as found in the Gospels involves the tradition of miraculous birth, they must be considered together. The Hellenistic Jews who held liberal opinions were not tolerated by the Jerusalem Jews. They seemed to threaten the abrogation of the Law. So those liberals realized — as converts to Christianity — that the Christian movement must be released from the national and legal fetters of Judaism. To this end it needed to be transplanted out of Palestine into the wide world of heathen religions and of liberal Greek culture. They would go and preach Jesus to the Gentiles. But when they entered the Graeco-Roman world, where men were accustomed to worshiping 'sons of gods,' they found, as historians tell us, that the lowly Jesus, who was also called 'servant,' did not command the respect and religious devotion of the pagans, whom the followers of Christ sought to win to the Christian faith. In his *History of the Christian Church* (vol. 2, p. 103), Philip Schaff speaks of the objections

<sup>1</sup> *The Apostolic Age*, p. 576.

the pagans urged against Jesus thus: 'His association with poor, unlettered fishermen, and rude publicans; his form of a servant and his ignominious death.'

Such circumstances again urged upon the Christian mind of the time the necessity of proving to the Greek world that Jesus, also, was the incarnation of the Deity. They were to prove to the Greeks that Jesus did not *become* the Son of God during his life on earth, but was *born* so, in the actual, physical sense; as they were to prove to the Jews that he was born in Bethlehem and was a son of David.

Now, our Evangelists join the two traditions together, which seemingly grew in the earlier stages of their development, independent of one another and the Gospels to which they were later attached, but give of either tradition contradictory accounts.

The Gospel of Mark, which Biblical scholars consider the oldest of the Gospels, says nothing of birth in Bethlehem, nor of miraculous birth. It first speaks of Jesus' coming from Nazareth to be baptized by John, and then gives an account of his ministry.

The Gospel of Matthew stands next to the Gospel of Mark with reference to date of authorship. In this gospel we first meet with

the story of miraculous birth. The author of this document takes it for granted that Bethlehem was Joseph's and Mary's home, and not Nazareth. The birth story begins thus: 'Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,' etc.<sup>2</sup> Our author, however, knows nothing of the 'manger,' for he speaks of the visit of the wise men thus: 'And when they came into the *house* they saw the young child with Mary his mother and fell down and worshiped him.'<sup>3</sup> Here we have a plain statement that Mary gave birth to the blessed child in her own city, Bethlehem, and in her own house, and not in a manger. Matthew speaks again of the appearance of the 'star in the east,' of the visit of the wise men, of the slaughtering of the babes by Herod, of the flight to Egypt, of the return to Palestine, and states that the reason Joseph and Mary went with the child to Nazareth at all was that upon their return from Egypt they found Archelaus (enemy of the Child) reigning in place of his father, Herod. So Matthew says: <sup>3</sup> 'And he — Joseph — came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth,' as though nothing was heard of that city before. And what is rather amusing in this second flight to Nazareth is that it makes false the call of the

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 2:1.<sup>3</sup> Matt. 2:11.<sup>3</sup> Matt. 2:23.

angel to Joseph in Egypt: 'Arise and take the young child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for *they are dead* which sought the young child's life.'<sup>1</sup> It may be the angel was not aware of the fact that Archelaus was not yet dead.

Luke, on the other hand, the latest of the first three gospels, gives not a hint that Bethlehem was Joseph's and Mary's home. He knows nothing of the 'star in the east,' of the visit of the wise men, the massacring of the infants, the flight to Egypt, or the second flight to Nazareth. In short, Luke knows nothing of the events Matthew speaks of. This is strange, indeed, in view of the doctrine that the Holy Spirit imparted to the Evangelists what they should write, and thus guarded them from error.

Luke speaks of Joseph and Mary as being citizens of Nazareth, and says that the reason they went to Bethlehem was to get enrolled with the descendants of David, when Caesar Augustus decreed that all the world should be enrolled, and Quirinius was governor of Syria.<sup>2</sup> He speaks of the birth of Jesus during this journey, of the accommodation of the child and his mother in a manger, of the appearance

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 2:20.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:1-5.

of the angel to the shepherds, of the celestial chorus singing what we love to call 'the first Christmas carol,' of the coming of the shepherds to Bethlehem and their seeing the Child lying in a manger. Luke speaks also of the circumcising of the child Jesus when eight days old, of his presentation at the temple by his parents, and reports the utterances of the aged Simeon concerning Jesus' future greatness, and his saying, 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen thy salvation.'

Luke closes his marvelous account by saying, 'When they had performed all things according to the law, they returned to *their own* city Nazareth.'<sup>1</sup> He does not intimate in the least that the going of the Holy Family *to a* city called Nazareth was a flight from danger; it was their home. Again, it is very strange that Matthew knows nothing of the events which Luke enumerates.

What does Jesus say concerning his birth? Not a word in all his recorded sayings. In one of his last arguments with the Jews, he says, 'Ye seek to kill me, a *man* that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God.'<sup>2</sup> What do we learn from Mary concerning the miracu-

<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:39.

<sup>2</sup> John 8:40.



lous birth of her son? Absolutely nothing. On the contrary, we have conclusive New Testament evidence that Jesus' departure from the orthodox faith of his fathers was very astonishing as well as displeasing to his mother. She and her other sons were absolutely opposed to Jesus' religious claims as a teacher.

From Mark 3:20-21, we learn that while Jesus was teaching in a certain house, 'the multitude cometh together again so that they could not so much as eat bread. And when his friends heard of it they went out to lay hands on him, for they said he was beside himself.' Who are those friends? Verse 32 says, 'and the multitude sat about and they said unto him, behold, thy mother and thy brothers without seek thee.' *They* were the 'friends' who thought he was beside himself because he was preaching new doctrines. What was his answer? Did he hasten to meet his blessed mother? No. His clear-cut answer was: 'Who is my mother and my brothers; for whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister and my mother.'<sup>1</sup> Evidently those who came to seize him, thinking he was beside himself, *did not* the will of God, as he taught it. In his ponderous Commentary

<sup>1</sup> Mark 3:33-35.

Adam Clarke, though genuinely orthodox, does not gloss the matter over. In commenting on this seeming disregard on the part of Jesus for his mother and his brothers, he justifies it on the ground that '*they* came to seize upon him, for they thought he was distracted.'

Now, can it be possible that the mother who had all the miraculous manifestations spoken of in Matthew and Luke to assure her of the supernatural character of her son; the woman who had heard the angel of God say to her, 'Hail! thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women!' and of her son that 'he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever'; the woman who had seen the sages of the East adore her babe as king, who heard the sublime prophecy of Simeon in the temple, and who fled to Egypt at the command of God's angel, should fail to understand the spiritual aims and purposes of her son, and go so far as to think that he was beside himself when she heard him preach his gospel?

The welding together of the two accounts — that of the birth at Bethlehem and of miraculous birth — and their attachment to the earlier accounts of Jesus' ministry, Biblical scholars attribute to a third and later hand. The join-

ing of the two statements was so inartistically done that, besides the many glaring contradictions which they contain, the rough joints are still visible to tell the story.

Matthew's genealogy ends thus, at 1:16:

And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ.' Biblical scholars have discovered that this text has passed through five stages of development before it reached its present form: (1) 'Jacob begat Joseph and Joseph begat Jesus'; (2) 'Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, who of her begat Jesus'; (3) 'and Joseph, to whom was espoused Mary the virgin, begat Jesus'; (4) 'Joseph, to whom was espoused the virgin Mary, who begat Jesus.' The fifth form is the one found in our present Gospel of Matthew and mentioned above.

Now, we can easily see that the first and most ancient form of this text speaks of Joseph as the father of Jesus and makes no reference to his mother. In the second reading Mary appears as the *wife* of Joseph. In the third reading she is his *spouse* and a *virgin*. In the fourth reading the antecedent of the pronoun 'who' is left undecided. But in the fifth we have Mary of *whom* was born Jesus. Here the evidence is unmistakable that the hands editing

this text were controlled during the different periods by the progress of doctrine from a natural to a supernatural birth. (For a detailed study of these changes, the reader is referred to the Articles 'Gospels' and 'Mary' in the *Encyclopedia Biblica*.)

In the Gospel of Luke (3:23), the joining of the two accounts of Jesus' birth is not so nicely done. Here we read: 'And Jesus began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph.' The phrase 'as was supposed' is a plain confession that no other thought originally prevailed in Judea than that Jesus was the son of Joseph. How the phrase 'as was supposed' got in is easily explained. The original object of the genealogy was to carry the line of descent directly from Joseph to David. When the theory of miraculous birth from a virgin became current, 'as was supposed' was apparently inserted to cover the difficulty.

Thus the longing of the Jews for a messiah of the line of David, and of the Greeks for an incarnate God, gave a *natural* birth to the story of *miraculous* birth in our gospels, with all its conveniences to satisfy the desires of both Jews and Greeks.

Here, then, we have two not only different

but contradictory and absolutely irreconcilable accounts of Jesus' birth. The fact that Mark, the earliest gospel, knows nothing of this story, and that Luke, the latest of the first three gospels, has the longest and most marvelous account of it, shows that the story originated and grew to the extent mentioned in Luke, between the first and fourth generations after Jesus' death.

Now, as has been previously stated, the heroic adventure of the original disciples and their followers — in their regathering at Jerusalem, where their Master was cruelly scourged and put to death — had for its purpose the continuing of his work, and, second, the converting of the whole Jewish nation to the belief that he was the long-expected Messiah. In this they failed. They attracted the favorable attention of a number of Jews who belonged by origin to the Diaspora — Hellenists who held liberal views and seemed by opinion and conduct to threaten the destruction of the Mosaic Law.

The Jews were willing to tolerate Peter and the rest, so long as they confined themselves to holding their peculiar opinions about the Messiah and remained faithful in their fulfillment of the Law. But when these admitted

Hellenists into their fellowship the situation became intolerable: a severe persecution arose. Stephen, a great leader among the Hellenists, ably advocated the universality of the gospel. This was taken to mean an attack on the Mosaic system as destined to pass away, and roused bitter indignation. Stephen was hurried beyond the limits of the city, where he was stoned to death. He was the first Christian martyr after Jesus.

The Hellenists were driven out of Jerusalem. The apostles alone remained in the city in some place of safety; for inasmuch as Jerusalem was regarded by them as the center of the new community and kingdom, it would not be right or seemly for them to forsake it.

The Hellenists scattered throughout the Gentile districts in the neighborhood of Palestine. One of them, Philip, made converts in Samaria. The conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, in Caesarea and some of his friends disclosed to the mind of Peter that the gospel might be a means of salvation for Gentiles as well as for the circumcised. The old apostle truly glorified God and man when he said to those Gentile converts as he was about to baptize them: 'Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation

he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him.' <sup>2</sup> Neither Peter nor Philip required of his converts the legal observance of the Law, especially the rite of circumcision, which the Romans abominated.

Now, the conversion of a few individuals on such terms was overlooked by the orthodox Jews. But when the scattered Hellenistic preachers offered salvation without the Law to whole communities the Jews met them with scornful rejection. For what was the meaning of the Old Testament promises, and what was to become of Jewish precedence in the messianic kingdom, if the Gentiles were to come in without first becoming Israelites according to the Mosaic law? What, then, was the use of being a Jew?

Nevertheless, the Hellenistic party opened a new epoch in the history of the young Church. By carrying the gospel message beyond the limits of Judea and freeing it from Jewish legalism, the Hellenistic missionaries gave the Christian movement a universal outlook.

As we have seen, the faith of the early congregation at Jerusalem differed so little from Judaism that to all appearances it was a sect believing in the Messiah and zealous of the

<sup>2</sup> Acts 10:34-35

Law. Had this conservative attitude of the early congregation been maintained, there never would have been a Christian Church. In all probability the movement Jesus inaugurated would have been destroyed with the Jewish state. The aggressive Hellenists put the Christian movement beyond such a disaster: they gave it a world-wide field and wrested the reins of leadership from orthodox Judea. So far as Christian theology was concerned, before the first century came to a close Jerusalem had sunk into insignificance, and Antioch and Alexandria became seats of authority. As we shall see later, the terminal point of Jewish thought became the starting-point of Graeco-Roman thought concerning the Christ.







JESUS  
OF  
ANTIOCH  
*The Word*



## JESUS OF ANTIOCH *The Word*

ANTIOCH, the great city of northern Syria, where the disciples were first called Christians, was deeply saturated with Greek philosophy. Early in the Apostolic Age it became the center of Gentile Christianity, as Jerusalem was the center of Jewish Christianity.

Now, the 'Word' is the English equivalent for the Greek word *Logos*. It means God's word, or His wisdom, or reason. The Greek theory was that God the Absolute was too great and holy to undertake the work of creation and management of this world, directly. Therefore, He begot of himself the Logos, his 'only begotten Son,' and assigned the task to him. So we have it in the Gospel of John: 'In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. By him all things were made. . . . In him was life; and life was the light of men. . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory as of the only begotten of the

Father, full of grace and truth.' But here our guide is not John, but Paul, whose writings are the oldest in the New Testament, as we have it, and who was the first Christian convert to preach the doctrine of the Logos as applied to Jesus. John will be considered afterward.

Paul (Saul) was born — probably about the time Jesus was born — in the city of Tarsus, in Asia Minor, which after Alexandria was the main seat of Hellenic culture, especially of the Stoic school. Besides that, the heathen religions — from which Paul borrowed — scarcely could be learned better anywhere than in Tarsus. As to his Jewish antecedents — before his conversion — Paul says he was 'circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the Law, a Pharisee; as touching zeal, persecuting the Church; as touching the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.' <sup>1</sup>

Many of Paul's experiences show that he was a visionary above the normal, and subject to trances. In this connection he says: 'I must needs glory, though it is not expedient; but I will come to visions and revelations of the

<sup>1</sup> Phil. 3:5-6.

Lord. I know of a man [that is, himself] in Christ, fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not; or whether out of the body, I know not; God knoweth), such a one caught up even to the third heaven . . . and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. . . . And by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations . . . that I should not be exalted overmuch, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, that I should not be exalted overmuch.' <sup>1</sup>

'The nature of this special weakness has given rise to many conjectures; the most probable is that it was of those obscure nervous disorders which are allied to epilepsy and sometimes mistaken for it.' <sup>2</sup>

Paul's overwhelming vision, which is variously reported in the Book of Acts, came to him while on his way to Damascus, 'with authority and commission of the high priest,' to persecute the Christians there. As he says: 'At midday, I saw on the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them that were with me. And when we were fallen to the earth, I heard a voice saying unto me in the Hebrew

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. 12:1-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia Biblica*.

Father, full of grace and truth.' But here our guide is not John, but Paul, whose writings are the oldest in the New Testament, as we have it, and who was the first Christian convert to preach the doctrine of the Logos as applied to Jesus. John will be considered afterward.

Paul (Saul) was born — probably about the time Jesus was born — in the city of Tarsus, in Asia Minor, which after Alexandria was the main seat of Hellenic culture, especially of the Stoic school. Besides that, the heathen religions — from which Paul borrowed — scarcely could be learned better anywhere than in Tarsus. As to his Jewish antecedents — before his conversion — Paul says he was 'circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the Law, a Pharisee; as touching zeal, persecuting the Church; as touching the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.' <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 12:1-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopædia Biblica*.



language, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks [R.V. goads]. And I said, who art thou, Lord? and the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest. But arise upon thy feet; for to this end I have appeared unto thee, to appoint thee a minister and a witness both of the things wherein thou hast seen me, and of the things wherein I will appear to thee; delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles unto whom I send thee; to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God; that they may receive remission of sins and an inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith in me.'<sup>1</sup>

Paul's marvelous conversion was the most memorable event in relation to the carrying of the gospel beyond the limits of Judaism. It gave him the assurance that it pleased God 'to reveal his Son' to him that he 'might preach Him among the Gentiles.'<sup>2</sup>

Paul was not the first, though undoubtedly the greatest, of the Christians who preached to the Gentiles. In his missionary journeys he met Christian communities in various Roman cities. Thus he says: 'When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptole-

<sup>1</sup> Acts 26:12-18.

<sup>2</sup> Gal. 1:16.

mais; and we saluted the brethren, and abode with them one day.' <sup>1</sup> Again, 'We came to Puteoli, where we found brethren, and were entreated to tarry with them seven days; and so we came to Rome. And from thence the brethren, when they heard of us, came to meet us as far as the Market of Appius.' <sup>2</sup>

The great apostle was subject to three great influences which shaped his life and his idea of Christ. First, the belief in the holiness and efficacy of the Jewish Law. He was fully acquainted with Jewish theology, for he lived for some time in Jerusalem, where a married sister of his resided, and there studied under the great Gamaliel.

Second, the apocalyptical ideas of his nation and his time. According to these a Satanic kingdom, with its hosts of demons, stood against the Kingdom of God with its hosts of angels. Satan and Michael the archangel warred for supremacy. The heavens (seven?) stood, one above the other, and held 'thrones, principalities, and powers' of angels and demons which controlled the various activities of the world. The air, also, was populated with demons under their head, 'the prince of the powers of the air.' These (by a sort of divine

<sup>1</sup> Acts 21:7.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 28:13-15.

connivance) were 'the rulers of this world.'<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the world was in darkness.

Along with these ideas was that of personified Wisdom (Greek *Logos*) by which God founded the world. Thus Wisdom speaks: 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, before the earth was. When he established the heavens, I was there.'<sup>3</sup>

The third influence which operated upon Paul was Greek philosophy, with which he was well acquainted, and through which he learned the Stoic doctrine of the *Logos*. This doctrine may be discerned — though not in its clearest outline — in the teachings of Paul. This is due to the fact that he was essentially a Jewish theologian; therefore he uses Jewish rather than Greek terminology. So he speaks of Jesus as 'the power and the wisdom of God.'<sup>4</sup> Yet Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher and theologian, uses the word '*Logos*' instead of '*Wisdom*.' To him the *Logos* is the sole mediator between earth and heaven, God and man. The writer of the Fourth Gospel — probably a Greek convert of the latter part of the first century — in order

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 2:8.

<sup>3</sup> Prov. 8:22 ff.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 1:24.

to satisfy the Greek mind, speaks of Christ as the Logos. So the plainer doctrine of the 'Word' in the Gospel of John could not have come from a Jewish source, nor from one of the original disciples. The philosophy of its prologue seems to have affinity with that of Philo.

Now, the essential and very apparent departure of the Gospel of John from the others is to be found in the interpretation of the person of Christ. According to the other gospels, Jesus was essentially a man with a human history, and had an extraordinary gift of the spirit. 'He increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with men.'<sup>1</sup> As Jesus grew and matured, his interaction with his environment, and his clear apprehension of the spiritual need of his people, made him conscious of his mission.

According to John, Jesus is the complete Son of God from the beginning; the divine Logos incarnate, clearly conscious of his descent from on high and of the glory which was his in the celestial life antecedent with the Father. Therefore, human growth and training are strange to him; from the beginning he knows all. Hence the sayings John ascribes to Jesus, which are

<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:52.

not found in the other gospels: 'I and the Father are one; I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one cometh unto the Father, but by me.' In John there is no temptation in the wilderness, no agony in Gethsemane, and no cry from the cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' The speeches that John ascribes to Jesus are so different in both form and substance from the Master's simple talks to his disciples — as found in the other gospels — that many Biblical scholars assert that those speeches are free compositions of the writer himself, who imagined what Jesus might have said. John's gospel is not a historical but a doctrinal work, and is of high spiritual value.

Now, to Paul, the mystic, 'sin' and the flesh' were active agents. He was deeply oppressed by this idea, and that of a world ruled by evil principalities and powers. Of all these he sought to rid himself through the wisdom and righteousness which were of the Law. But this did not avail him, inasmuch as the observance of the Law was accomplished through the flesh. Hence his cry, 'O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?' <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom. 7:24.

When Paul found Christ, or 'was found of him,' what did he find? It was not the Galilean teacher who lived and died in Palestine — of Jesus' earthly life Paul scarcely takes notice. Nor was it the exclusive Jewish Messiah who was to subdue all nations to Israel. To Paul the issue was not between Jews and Gentiles, but a war to the knife between 'flesh' and 'spirit'; and between the powers of darkness and the wicked 'thrones and principalities' in heavenly places, on the one side, and the divine powers, on the other. In his vision of Christ, the struggling Paul met the conqueror of all evil forces, and through him he himself won the victory which the Law failed to give him.

To Paul, Jesus was 'of the seed of David according to the flesh.' He chose to come into the world through that agency. But in reality he was the 'Heavenly Man,' the embodiment of the mystery of the eternal God, with whom he was in glory before all things. But when the world and man fell under the sway of the powers of darkness, and the Law failed to afford redemption, Jesus 'emptied himself' of his heavenly glory, and appeared on the earth 'in the likeness of sinful flesh, in order to condemn sin in the flesh.'

How did Jesus condemn sin? To Paul all

seems very simple. Since the flesh was under the powers of sin and darkness, by taking on this flesh Jesus fell under the dominion of those powers. They, not knowing the secret and wisdom of his coming, condemned and crucified him. The pain and curse and shame of the cross fell upon the flesh. The crucified one rose from the dead in a spiritual body, 'ascended on high and led captivity captive.' Thus, as by taking on the form of sinful flesh Jesus became subject to the Law and the powers of darkness, by dying in the flesh he died to both; and by rising and ascending to heaven he defeated and transcended both. Therefore, the believer in Christ, who is 'buried with him in baptism and risen with him by faith,' is made free of both sin and the Law.

Here it seems certain that in his interpretation of Jesus Paul was influenced by the doctrines of the Graeco-Roman cults; of Adonis, Attis, Osiris, Isis, and Mithra. The idea of the god who dies and returns to life was dominant at the time. The rescue of the god from death is a guarantee of a like rescue to the adherents of his cult. In the mysteries of Mithra, the fact that the worshiper partook of the god's life by the mystical participation in his death, the worshiper experienced a new birth

— became a new man. The striking resemblance between this and Paul's theory of Jesus' death and resurrection, the death of the believer with him in baptism, and resurrection by faith, and the statement that 'if a man is in Christ, he is a new creature,' at least invite the suspicion that the Mithra cult, which was centered in Paul's native city, Tarsus, exerted much influence upon the great apostle.

However, what is clear is that with his conception of Christ, Paul sweeps the ages. He passes over the history of his nation as a mere incident; goes back to Adam, by whom 'all sinned,' and designates him the 'old man,' and looks up to Christ and calls him the 'new man.' He cries to all the seed of Adam, Jew and Greek, bond and free, male and female, to 'put away the old man of sin, and put on the new man of righteousness.' He proclaims exultingly: 'Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.'<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the Nicean theologians and their orthodox spiritual descendants, Paul does not speak of Christ as being on equality with God. To him post-resurrection Christ is greater than pre-resurrection Christ; because it was by his obeying the Father in coming down to earth

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17.



and even 'unto the death of the cross, that God highly exalted him and gave unto him the name which is above every name.'<sup>1</sup> After having accomplished his work, Christ was 'to deliver up the kingdom to the Father... then shall the Son also himself be subjected to him that subjected all things unto him, that God may be all in all.'<sup>2</sup>

Paul stands in history as one of its greatest men. Yes, but to us, the children of this age, he shows weakness in his interpretation of Christ. To him Jesus came from on high and did not rise from the depth of human life with its various fortunes and misfortunes. He came a victor *in advance!* who played a rôle on the stage here, just to outwit the powers of darkness. Here one cannot but ask: If Jesus put on only the '*likeness* of sinful flesh,' how can he be the helper of *real* men who struggle with *real* flesh? And how were the powers of sin and death defeated when only the *form* of a man was crucified? What, then, is the power of the cross? Are we to accept this form of a man in place of the real Jesus — soul and body — the great Son of God, brother of man and our sure spiritual guide, who was 'touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and was in

<sup>1</sup> Phil. 2:8-9.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 15:24-28.

all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin'?<sup>1</sup> And why should a divine being, as Paul's Christ, resort to such a disguise in order that he might conquer the powers of sin and death?

But it is not the purpose here to detail Paul's theology, nor to fix the eyes only on the seams in his armor. His unwavering courage, firm will, deep sincerity, unconquerable faith, stand unsurpassed in Christian history. From the beginning to the end of his career, righteousness was the ideal Paul kept in view. Like his Master, he held that the unity of man with God finds its adequate manifestation only in the unity of all men with each other, and all diversities of gifts are made to serve one spiritual life. 'There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are diversities of ministrations, and the same Lord. And there are diversities of workings, but the same God, who worketh all things in all.'<sup>2</sup> Whatever may be obsolete in his teachings, Paul's letters (epistles) to the churches he founded or visited contain precepts

Unwasted by the lapse of years,  
Unchanged by changing place.

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<sup>1</sup> Heb. 4:15.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 12:4-6.

Of them are: 'Render to no man evil for evil. Be not overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.... The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness and peace in the Holy Spirit.... Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.... Be tenderly affectioned one to another; not slothful in business; fervent in spirit, serving the Lord... rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing steadfastly in prayer; given to hospitality.... Ye are the temple of God, and the spirit of God dwelleth in you.... The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, meekness, faithfulness, self-control.... To be carnally minded is death; to be spiritually minded is life and peace.... Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are lovely and of good report; if there be any virtue; if there be any praise, think on these things, and the God of peace shall be with you.' Here we have an excellent and immortal program for daily living, regardless of race and creed.

Paul was rightly the greatest of the apostles of the Hellenistic movement, and the hero of the Christian conquest of the Roman Empire. In his arduous, extensive journeys and his

triumphs, he was a second Alexander, but on a peaceful expedition. He soon realized along with his fellow workers that just as the old messianic hope was the only medium through which his Jewish disciples could receive Jesus, the old Logos doctrine was similarly the only medium through which the Graeco-Roman cults could receive this new spiritual leader as 'Lord.' So to these pagan cults, each of which had its 'Saviour-Lord,' Paul gave the 'Lord Jesus Christ' — the Word — who was destined, soon, to sweep those pagan lords away and give the Roman world, which was in a state of decay, religiously and politically, the gospel of a new life, and a far higher ethical standard than the pagan cults ever knew.

So it was chiefly through the efforts of the mystical, imperial-minded Paul that Christianity first became the religion of the Roman Empire and proclaimed JESUS — THE WORD the one and only Redeemer.





JESUS  
OF  
NICEA  
*The Deity*



## JESUS OF NICEA *The Deity*

IN THE preceding part, I dealt with Christianity's penetration of the Roman world, and alluded to the establishment there of many Christian communities or churches. As yet they had not become a unity, either in creed or action; therefore, their scattered forces did not influence the collective life of the Roman Empire as effectively as otherwise they might have done. According to what seems to be a natural law, the forces which tend to modify human thinking work faster from the center to the circumference than from the circumference to the center. A force working from the center outward touches more points than does a force working from a point at the circumference inward.

Now, the doctrines of Christendom, up to the time of the Council of Nicea, A.D. 325, had no authoritative center to proceed from; and Christendom had not one creed. The bond of union among the churches was fraternal more than creedal. What they had in common was their devotion to the person of Christ as



Saviour, the rite of baptism, and the fraternal meal — the Lord's Supper.

As we have learned already from the first three gospels, Jesus' immediate disciples knew him as a citizen of Nazareth endowed with the spirit of prophecy. Those who walked, and talked, and sailed with him on the Sea of Galilee never for a moment thought they were associating with the Creator of the Universe. After his death, they enshrined him as the Messiah.

When Paul appeared with his mystical Christ who transcended all Jewish expectations, there is no evidence whatever that the members of the Jerusalem church accepted all his views. On the contrary, they at first refused him the right hand of fellowship because of his liberalism. But they finally made a compromise with him: that he would preach to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. The Greeks, who led the world in philosophy, accepted Paul's Christ — the incarnation of the Thought of the eternal God. So, at the close of the first century, we find Christianity on the whole leavened with the thought that Christ was the incarnation of the Logos, and definitely separated from legalistic Judaism. But such a philosophical thought could not by any conceivable means

stand still. It had its inherent difficulties, and it fell upon the most fertile soil of speculative thinking. Therefore, about the middle of the second century a most puzzling question engaged the minds of Christian theologians, namely, 'If Christ was the incarnation of the Logos, was he eternal or created? Was there a time when the Logos was not?'

Irenaeus of Lyons asserted that the Son was coeternal with the Father; that the Father was the invisible form of the Son, and the Son the visible form of the Father. Tertullian of Carthage, a most aggressive theologian, asserted that the Son was not eternal: the Word first emanated from the Father when He said, 'Let there be light.' Therefore, the Son was begotten at a certain moment of time. The great Origen of Alexandria asserted that the Word, the Son, was eternal but inferior to the Father. The Monarchians — a school of theologians who were zealous not only of the sovereignty of God, but of the tender, companionable humanity of Jesus — stood for the doctrine that Jesus was a human being filled with the spirit of God. Sabellius and his followers considered Father, Son, and Spirit as three modes of the one divine personality. For this, they were charged with the heresy of 'confounding the persons.'

Such opposing views raged in Christendom up to the close of the third century, and bred divisions and strifes and hatreds. Theologians and bishops became leaders of factions. The emphasis began to shift from the simple faith of the heart to the correctness of definition. The ordinary man was changed from a follower of the holy Nazarene to a partisan, a voter on theological issues. The supreme question was no longer 'Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' and the answer ceased to be 'Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself.' The question of the times became 'What definition shall I accept of this transcendent being you call the Son, in order to be a good follower of my bishop, and escape persecution?' The answer depended on the community in which the questioner resided.

But such theological squabbles did not remain of significance to theologians only; they began to be of great political and social significance. The Christian faith had become — at the close of the third century — the faith of influential Roman personages and communities. Judaism rejected Christianity, and heathendom accepted it.

At that time the Roman Empire was a seeth-

ing caldron of clashing ambitions: there existed no fewer than six claimants to the imperial throne. When the Emperor Constantine — who was converted to Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century — succeeded in crushing his rivals and ascended the throne, he felt himself in sore need for a united church, if he would have a united empire.

In the year 325, Constantine and his politico-religious advisers called together the famous Council of Nicea, whose purpose was to frame an authoritative doctrine for the Church, as to whether Jesus the 'Son' was of the *same* substance and coeternal with the Father, or of *like* substance and subordinate to the Father. Constantine was never fully weaned from the cultus of Apollo, the son of Zeus, so he already possessed the doctrine of two divinities — 'Father' and 'Son.'

The debate lasted about two months. At last, at the 'right' moment, Hosius, the Bishop of Cordova, Spain, who was the mouthpiece of Constantine, appeared suddenly in the Council and announced that the will of the Emperor was that the Son be declared of the same essence as the Father and on an equality with Him. This was declared not only the vote of the Council but the law of the State.

Those who refused to accept it were punished as offenders against the law as well as the doctrine.

But the imperial enactment of the Council of Nicea, with all its conquering power, could not have been sufficient of itself to secure permanently the submission of Christendom to its authority. Other favoring circumstances gave that solemn decision an almost undisputed sway for more than a thousand years. It should be kept in mind that the growth of the Church brought into it a huge body of pagan raw material. The tendency of the heathen mind was not to seek fine moral-spiritual qualities in the character of Jesus and to realize his teachings in one's life, but to sublimate his person in an extravagant, superstitious manner.

Besides, the longing of the less fortunate classes in the Roman Empire was not for a 'social gospel,' but for private salvation through a redeeming Lord. It was this feeling of the common man, in an introspective and spiritually insecure age, that led him to find in the person of the exalted Christ his divine friend and helper. God was no longer remote. In the person of His Son — who was in a mysterious way the Father himself — God

walked the dusty roads of life with the humblest believer. On one side of his nature infinite and almighty, on the other human, compassionate, and companionable, the divine Christ clasped the hand of his individual follower. A sufferer, yet a conqueror, he not only knew what the sufferings of his lesser brethren were, but imparted to them the spirit of victory. The cross, therefore, which symbolized his agonies, his love, and his triumph, always brought the Christ-God to the wrestling individual as a divine reinforcement in hours of supplication and penance; as a reconciler and sustainer in times of sickness and pain, and an almighty consoler in the hour of death.

The rank and file of Christian believers knew nothing of the metaphysics of supernaturalism. Their utter dependence upon some divine Being to save them from their sins and open to them the gates of a far-off heaven obtained their acceptance of any Christological theory which their leaders saw fit to offer them. So with their hopes and fears, sins and sufferings, the Christian generations clung to the person of a supernatural Christ, like vines to a mighty tree. And it was such purely mystical, popular convictions and feelings which gave, and

still give, to supernatural Christology its security against the assaults of rationalists and intellectuals.

From the Nicene Council to the seventh century, many ecclesiastical councils were held and fixed the Trinitarian doctrines as stated in what is called the 'Athanasian Creed,' which has dominated the mind of orthodox Christendom until now. But the conduct of the personnels of those councils was very discreditable:

'Those ancient assemblies were often tumultuous, and their proceedings were frequently marked by an absence of fairness as well as dignity. Even the first Nicene Council, as we have seen, the noblest of these bodies, was governed by the imperial will. Gregory of Nazianzus, the renowned theologian, who presided for a while over the first Council of Constantinople, in 381, said that he had never known a synod which did not aggravate the evils which it undertook to remedy. Cardinal Newman, an admirer of the Ecumenical Councils, says that they have nothing to boast of in regard to the fathers, taken individually, which composed them. They appear as the antagonist host in a battle, not as the shepherds of their people. And he has drawn a

graphic picture of the scenes of violence at Ephesus in 431, where Cyril and other leaders, inflamed with bitter hostility, appeared each with an armed escort. Even at Chalcedon, the outcries of the bishops, and other unseemly displays of passions, were such as would hopelessly disgrace any modern church assembly.' <sup>1</sup>

The ecclesiastical contentions of those councils, which rendered them disreputable, did not die with them. The leading bishops of the Greek Catholic Church and the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church continued the struggle; and, to this day, each of these ancient churches claims to be the true orthodox church which Christ established, and the other schismatic and heretical. But Protestantism, though not completely free from the spirit of persecution — its inheritance from the mother Church — appeared as a great factor in the ushering in of a new age.

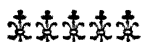
The Protestant Reformation, whose primary purpose was the purification of the Church from within, did not change the status of Christ as it was fixed by the Council of Nicea. Trinitarian theology underwent no modifications at the hands of the early reformers. They rather

<sup>1</sup> Professor George Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 135.



stressed the doctrine of vicarious salvation and, doing away with the authority of the Pope, greatly magnified and exalted the authority of the Bible. Yet the principle of individual freedom, which Protestantism advocated but remained averse to the full exercise of, was too vital to be permanently suppressed. As it has been said, 'The mightiest force in the world is a great idea whose hour has come.' Through the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the scientific examination of history and natural phenomena, the progress of individual freedom in religion as well as in politics could no longer be successfully resisted. Its hour had come, and with it the hour of liberalism and a liberal Christology, restoring Jesus to history and to the Church.

What Jesus means to the modern mind will be considered in the following pages.



JESUS  
OF THE  
MODERN MIND

*The Brother  
and Guide*



JESUS OF THE MODERN MIND *The Brother  
and Guide*

THE first fact to be considered here is that the modernness of a thinker is to be attributed not to the period in which he was born, but to his tendencies, beliefs, and ideals. Nor can it be safely assumed that in any given age the 'modern mind' is universal. Even in our 'wondrous' twentieth century we have an abundance of individual minds as primitive as those of the time of Abraham.

The true, liberal modern thinker is he who is free from narrowness and bigotry — especially in religion and politics — and who, while he would own 'all the good the past hath had,' refuses to believe that the past has spoken the last word, and to submit to arbitrary authority, old or new, ecclesiastical or political. He is a seeker of the truth of nature and of life with an open mind, and stands in his watchtower ever looking for new revelations. To him no doctrine, no theory, no system is too sacred to be investigated and

tested in the crucible of free, fair, and sound thinking. Progress, whose ultimate source and dynamic is the originating Mind (God), is unlimited. Man is the instrumentality of progress in this world, and, being such, he must not pose as an utter dependent upon God, but go forth and be a co-worker with Him.

Now, 'modern,' liberal minds — the agencies of progress — have existed in every age; and in every age the 'standstills' (the orthodox) have anathematized, persecuted, and martyred them as irreverent and destructive critics of 'sacred' ordinances and systems, and 'breeders of infidels.' That such cruel persecutions are not practiced in our own times is due to the fact that in the last four hundred years the progressive triumphs of great, brave liberal minds have constantly tended to check absolutism and tyranny in Church and State, and to rationalize theology, politics, the social codes, and every other theory of human relations and interests.

But the spirit of intolerant orthodoxy still has its devotees who, since they cannot persecute, point at the liberals with the hateful finger of scorn. In the field of religion they dread and hate what is known as the 'Higher Criticism.' Like other liberal clergymen, during my long

ministry, I have been asked scores of times by fearful orthodox: 'What has the Higher Criticism left us of the Bible? Anything but the covers?' This being the case, I will first give attention to this branch of science — the Higher Criticism — and what it has done to the Bible, then try to present the modern mind's estimate of Jesus.

Now, the Higher Criticism (the phrase originated in the eighteenth century) is concerned with the sources of documents, their historical sequence, and the credibility of the history they contain. The Low Criticism deals with the integrity and character of the text.

What has criticism left us of the Bible? It has left us the whole of it from cover to cover. Not a single book, not a single chapter, nor verse, nor word has criticism taken away from the Bible. This science means simply to tell us how the Bible came into being, and make it better understood and more highly prized by those who care for it. What criticism has destroyed is an old and erroneous conception we once had of the Bible, and many hate to have a new one in its place. They even hate to face the fact that the destruction of an inherited view of the Bible does not mean the destruction of the Book itself. In pre-scientific

times the belief prevailed that thunder is the voice of God. So we have it in the Bible, 'God thundereth marvelously with his voice.'<sup>2</sup> Science came and told us that thunder is the sound of an explosion caused by the meeting in the sky of two electrical currents. The explanation demolished the old belief but not the thunder, nor man's faith in God. The same applies to the Bible: our inherited view of it is passing, but its soul-stirring and soul-renewing passages remain with us.

We inherited, and did not establish for ourselves, the view that the Bible is one book and is the Word of God, perfect and infallible. Where did we get this view? Not from the Bible itself but from the Church, and the Church got it from later Judaism. This is precisely what criticism tells us: that such a view was formed late in Jewish history and inherited by the Church, but is only a doctrine.

The ancient Hebrews had no such view. They lived and worshiped God without a Book. They were led by their faith, their wise men, and accumulated traditions. It does not require scholarship to realize that a book could not exist before those who wrote it. The Book of Judges could not have been written before

<sup>2</sup> Job 37:5.

there were judges, nor the Book of Kings before there were kings, et cetera. All the great prophets lived and taught before there was any Bible.

Now, we have inherited the idea that the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses. Scholars say, No, that cannot be the case. How do they know? Here are some internal evidences. In Exodus 25 we have a set of directions for the building of a sanctuary, reported to have been given to Moses by Jehovah. Here the people are commanded to bring offerings of gold, silver, and brass; blue, purple, scarlet, and fine linen; oil, spices, and sweet incense; to build an ark of acacia wood and overlay it with gold inside and out, and to place a crown of gold upon it.

But the Bible tells us also that Moses and his people were shepherds and lived in the wilderness. They had no gold nor silver, and certainly no precious cloth of blue and purple and fine linen. Of a truth, they had no artists who could make rings and crowns of gold! Even in 1 Samuel 13:19, which speaks of the days of King Saul — a period hundreds of years this side Moses — we are told that the Hebrews were so destitute of artisans that 'there was no smith found throughout all the land of



Israel.' The Israelites had to go to the Philistines to have their plowshares, axes, and mattocks sharpened. Now, we know without the aid of scholarship that even with plowshares and axes and mattocks — which Moses did not even possess — you could not make rings and crowns of gold, nor weave scarlet and fine linen.

From the foregoing and from knowledge of the structure and furnishings of the Temple at Jerusalem, scholars could not but conclude that the plans mentioned above were for the building of Solomon's temple, and not the tent in which Moses lived and worshiped. So also the command with regard to having a king,<sup>2</sup> 'who shall not multiply horses . . . nor wives to himself' refers to Solomon's excesses, and could not have been written before his time.

So the purpose of criticism is not to destroy the Bible, but to reveal it anew to our understanding. One of its most beneficent results is the discovery that — like other sacred books — the Bible is a progressive record of man's endeavor to find and reconcile himself to what he believes is the eternal and sacred Reality, and not a ready-made gift from on high. It is an evolution which, from a very crude beginning, culminated in the purest religion in

<sup>2</sup> Deut. 17:14-17.

the possession of man. And it is one of the wonders of history that this evolution of some two thousand years — from Abraham to Jesus — occurred in the life of one race, the Hebrew race.

Now, those who reject the evolutionary theory and consider the Bible an external revelation from God put all its teachings on the same level; and, in order to escape the difficulty their position involves, they assert that God revealed religion to man according to man's capacity to receive. When man was as yet a crude being God revealed to him a crude religion, et cetera. But if the Almighty could not reveal to savage man anything but a savage religion, full of cruel practices, does it not follow that God must share the savagery of man? The doctrine of evolution does not so reproach God. It shows clearly that when man was a savage he had a savage religion, and when he became civilized had a civilized religion; that in process of the centuries man has been discovering the truth of God according to the maturity of his own mind. So it is more in harmony with the facts of life to think of man as the progressive discoverer of religion than to charge God with all the crudities and cruelties of humanity. This is what criticism has

revealed; and that not by mere speculation, but by calling attention to the Bible record itself. Here are some examples.

The earliest books in our Bible are those of Judges and Samuel, followed by the books of Kings. In these books we find the Hebrews to be polytheists and idolaters. Moses' efforts were directed toward making the tribes under him worship not the *only* God, but Jehovah *his* God. The command is, 'Thou shalt have no other god before me... for I am a jealous God.' Even in the Psalms we read, 'There is none like unto thee among the gods, O Lord,' <sup>1</sup> and 'Oh give thanks unto the God of gods.' <sup>2</sup> The Hebrews not only recognized the gods of other nations but at times worshiped them; because, like other peoples, they considered a god to be great in his own realm. In Judges 3:5-6, we read that when the Israelites came to dwell among the Canaanites, Hittites, and other, they 'married their own daughters to the sons of those peoples, and served their gods.' Solomon, also, built altars to foreign gods 'in the mount before Jerusalem.' <sup>3</sup> Even in the sixth century B.C. Jeremiah cried, 'According to the number of thy cities are thy gods, O Judah.' <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ps. 86:8.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. 136:2.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 11:7.

<sup>4</sup> Jer. 11:13.

The Bible gives also evidences of human sacrifices: the story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac,<sup>1</sup> and the more definite act of Jephthah when he sacrificed his own daughter to Jehovah, because He helped him to win a battle.<sup>2</sup> By adding to all this the picture given of God in the earlier parts of the Bible — a God who is 'jealous,' who does things hastily and 'repents' for having done them; who requires 'an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, burning for burning,' and who is an exclusively national God with corresponding prejudices, we realize how far the Hebrews had to travel before reaching the stage where they knew God as the God of all the earth, with whom there is forgiveness, an all-wise God whose judgments are true and righteous altogether.

This came with the great prophets who called their people to give themselves to acts of justice and mercy, and not to the offering of sacrifices and the observances of 'times and seasons.' We hear these loftier notes in the words of the Psalmist, 'Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?'<sup>3</sup> and 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.... Thou delightest not in sacrifice; else

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 22.<sup>2</sup> Judges 11:30-40.<sup>3</sup> Ps. 139.

would I give it: the sacrifices of God are a broken (humble) spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.<sup>1</sup> Jesus also summarily revises the scriptures of his fathers when he says: 'Ye have heard that it was said of old times, "tooth for tooth, eye for eye," but I say unto you resist not evil. . . . Ye have heard "Thou shalt love thy neighbor (kinsman) and hate thine enemy," but I say unto you, Love your enemies,' et cetera (Sermon on the Mount). Here we have clear evidence that the later prophets and Jesus did not consider the Bible as the infallible word of God, nor think that it was sinful to amend any of its precepts.

Now, what practical difference is there between the doctrine of a supernatural revelation and that of the evolution of religion and morality in the Bible? It is that the first doctrine considers God as a partner in the cruelties of man, and, by putting all its teachings on the same level, makes the Bible a puzzle. According to the doctrine of evolution, its crude and immoral teachings are ascribed to man when he was in his mental and moral childhood and groping for light. Here the myths, legends, and cruel precepts of the Bible, as well as its

<sup>1</sup> Ps. 51.

noble teachings, become natural and begin to throb with life. Its crude parts are the rough stones in the foundation of religious progress, and its living truths religion's beautiful superstructure.

Thus modern scholarship reveals the Bible as a true record of human aspiration and search for religious truth. It should be accepted and studied in its entirety as history and as a book of religious devotion, which contains immortal, soul-restoring, and soul-renewing truths. Such a study will reveal the great Book, from the Books of Samuel to those of the New Testament, as a record of glorious battles for spiritual liberation, which proclaim the glory of God and the glory of man.

Now, in view of all that has been said, there can be no clearer truth than that the Bible is a human book — the Word of Man about God.

*Jesus and the Modern Mind.* It is a well-known and much regretted fact that in the New Testament we have no real biography of Jesus in the modern sense. This, with the fact that contemporaneous historians do not mention him, has been and remains a subject of earnest debate as to whether such a person as Jesus actually lived, or is a mythical figure.

But this should not tempt us to make of it a

bewildering mystery. Certainly it would have been of supreme value to the world if some one of Jesus' disciples could have done for his Master what Boswell did for Johnson. But that was not the method of the time. We have no biographies in the Bible. As a rule, the ancient Easterners — and their modern descendants are not very different from them — had no deep interest in the details of a great man's life, from birth to death. Their real interest in such a man would be in his ministry and its general influence upon their lives. Otherwise, a few words about his birth, certain striking incidents in his life, and his death sufficed them.

In this fashion the kings and the prophets are presented in the Old Testament, and Jesus in the New. Our gospels, which were written long after his death, and on which all 'lives' of Jesus are based, do not claim to give a biography of him. They began to be written as recollections of his 'words' and 'acts' as teacher and healer. Later, the stories of his birth, death, and resurrection were added.

Nor should it be considered an evidence of his being a mythical creation that contemporaneous historians do not mention Jesus. Why should pagan historians be interested in a

Jewish youth, the son of a Galilean carpenter, who, like many others who preceded him, went about among his own people as preacher and healer for two or three years, and then was accused by them of heresy and sedition, and put to death by the Roman authorities?

I firmly believe that if Jesus had lived in the time of Isaiah — a creative, prophetic period in the history of Israel — instead of that of Caiaphas, he would have suffered no violence. Jesus' troubles arose from the fact that he was a prophet who fell among priests: a creative thinker and reformer who appeared in the midst of scribes and theologians who, being wedded to tradition, hated and feared change. Jewish nationalism had been destroyed, and the vigor of the people was at a very low ebb.

Now, the modern liberals face a somewhat similar situation. The Unitarian body — whose founders were the pioneers of liberalism in America — are especially antagonized (theologically) by the orthodox. But the liberals are not limited to Unitarianism: a great host of them pervade the Protestant communion. Therefore, in speaking of modern religious thinkers I shall use the more inclusive term 'liberals,' rather than a denominational designation.



The seekers of the Light are one.  
One in the freedom of the truth,  
One in the joys of path untrod,  
One in the soul's perennial youth,  
One in the large thought of God.

The liberals are charged with the 'crime that they make of Jesus a mere man. I, for one, know no such phrase. Man is man, and not a *mere* man. So Jesus spoke of himself, 'a man who hath told you the truth.' He called his humble disciples sons of God, and not *mere* men.

What our orthodox friends need to know — among other things — is that we liberals are not an authoritative institution. As free, spiritually affiliated individuals and churches, we have been and are truth-seekers and not creed-makers. On the whole, we are freely and definitely committed to the acceptance of the valid conclusions of modern scholarship with regard to Jesus' essential humanity. Therefore, to us Jesus' commanding position in the world is due to the fact that he was a man in whom the spiritual genius of humanity — whose source is God — rose to supreme height.

In accepting the spiritual leadership of Jesus — the First Citizen of religious democracy — what we have in mind is the leadership of

greatness, and not of assumed authority; of example, and not of command. Nor would we lapse into that unwarrantable mystical mood and implore the long-departed Jesus to do for us what we only can and must do for ourselves. We would no more do this than we would pray to Washington and Lincoln to perform our patriotic duties, nor to Plato to do our thinking for us.

Nor is our reverence for Jesus less sincere and less vitalizing because we do not indulge ourselves in calling him, 'Lord, Lord.' We revere him because — inspired and heartened by his example — we would, like him, tread the rugged road of noble purpose and spiritual heroism, and earnestly endeavor to realize his great precepts in our own lives and the life of the world. No other spiritual leader can be so inspiring and no example so permeative as Jesus of Nazareth. Our literature is saturated with his thoughts and thoughts about him.

'His name is not so much written as plowed into the history of the world.'

We also would share with the Christian generations the idealization of his person. We are by no means averse to that idealization which is guided by reason and in touch with reality. But we are decidedly opposed to that

dogmatism which — under the guise of idealization — removes Jesus of Nazareth from the human sphere.

As a matter of fact, the Church never knew the real Nazarene, either as a man or as a teacher. Its theological inheritance was more Greek than Hebrew. It grew and flourished on Gentile soil. Its pioneer theologian was Paul, and its converts were largely of pagan origin. When the Church adopted their mysteries (sacraments), the adherents of the pagan cults came into it where they had their doctrines under a new management.

Now, Paul — as seen in his writings — is at once a revealer and a mystifier. His spiritual passion is deep and his moral ideals high. His interpretation of the Christian faith is rich in moral precepts and permeated with a sincere and intense conviction. Yet his deep concern about his own salvation makes him speak often in mystical and rhetorical terms of uncertain meaning. His saying — seemingly in a moment of nervous introspection — ‘O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?’ is of that kind. He was not such a wretch, if we are to judge him by his lofty teachings. Here he seems to disown his moral sense. And in his saying ‘It is not

I that live, but Christ liveth in me,' in order to exalt Christ, he obliterates his own personality. In all this he sets an example not altogether safe to follow. It has done much harm as a standard by which the Church has measured human personality. Men have been taught that in them there is nothing good; that all the good was in Christ.

Some time ago an orthodox preacher said in a sermon, 'A Christian is a man in whom self is decreasing, and Christ increasing.' This must mean that self in the individual must go, and Christ take its place. Could the conclusion here be any other than that man is nothing and a supernatural Christ is all? This seems to derive from the Oriental philosophy which says, God is the All, and human personality — considered as an entity — is an illusion.

It does not seem possible that there can be serious disagreement that the purpose of religion is to elevate the individual and make him increasingly sure of himself and able to develop his own spiritual possibilities. The real value of a great personality, like that of Jesus, is to be found not in its solitariness, but in the fact that it is an impressive evidence which is to be found — in various degrees — in the rank and file of human individuals.

For how could we profit by the teaching and example of a great man if we were not part-takers of his nature? It is a condemnation of humanity to say that only great personalities are divine, and the rest of men are carnal.

Not so do we understand Jesus. We believe, as he did, that the spirit which dwelt in him dwells in us — according to our measure — as our divine inheritance. If a great spiritual leader is to be of real value to humanity, his leadership must be such as to produce leaders from the rank and file of his fellow men — as a line of succession — and encourage self-rule in other men to the end that spiritual democracy may be established and maintained. This is also the purpose of political democracy: it is to make the average individual, and not only the few exceptional men, the embodiment of law and order. The followers must be so encouraged, else democracy is doomed to failure. Similarly, if goodness and holiness are to be found only in Christ and in God, then humanity is a mere superfluity.

It is this low estimate of man and the dwelling of the Church on 'original sin' instead of original virtue, together with the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity, that opened the chasm between theology and progress. It is

this that brought into being such hymns as 'Oh, to be nothing, nothing, but a broken and empty vessel at thy feet.' A sad conception of the human soul, which to Jesus is of infinite worth. It made this world seem to be nothing but a 'vale of tears,' and assured men that they were helpless and needed a supernatural Redeemer. So the Redeemer the Church offered was not Jesus of Nazareth, but 'God the Son' brought into this world — at the Council of Nicea — by the will of a Roman emperor.

The Church proclaimed itself the divine guardian of helpless man, and the custodian and dispenser of the sacramental means of his salvation. And it must be said here that the sacraments — both those derived from paganism and those originated by the Church — were by no means devoid of ethical values. They were also — even as myths — very helpful to those spiritually sick. The Church had also its wealth of devotion, philanthropy, and scholarship. Its bishops fought valiantly in defense of the common people against tyrannical rulers. But, alas, in course of time the Church became infected with the disease it meant to eradicate. It assumed an imperialistic position of ecclesiastical authority, supreme and infallible. This lust for undisputed power

on the part of the Church made of Christianity a religion suppressive of individual freedom: the sacraments became a dictator's weapons instead of a means of grace. It would be amusing, if it were not so devastating, to think of the 'holy sacraments' — administered in the name of Christ — appearing on the same chart with the frightful Inquisition and its instruments of torture and death. No heretic had a right to live.

Thus far I have traced the course of events in the life of Jesus — from the Jordan to Nicea — and the myths and legends which overlaid his real and simple story as found in the older strata of the Gospels, before they were alloyed with the thoughts of later theologians, which were read back into Jesus' mind. The miraculous tales which clustered around Jesus' name traveled down the stream of time as oral traditions — for at least two generations — before they were recorded. And, then, the copyists and commentators added to and amplified those stories for several generations thereafter.

Now modern scholars — the guides of Christian liberals — have been engaged in removing those incrustations, and revealing underneath the true picture of Jesus in the older Gospels.

Through the openings they have made, we are able and glad to see our brother and guide, Jesus — a son of man and a son of God. In his teachings we find no reference to Jehovah, the god of thunder, who loved only one People, had only one Son, inspired only one Book, and, according to the Roman Catholics, established only one Church — that is, their own. To Jesus God is the loving Father of all men, whose healing mercy embraces the just and the unjust, and is the inspirer of all the souls that seek Him.

Again we find that Jesus was no magician and no miracle-worker. Whatever view we may take of the 'miracles' of the Gospels, we can at least clearly see that Jesus was constantly struggling against the crude supernaturalism of his day. He refused with indignation and scorn the demand for a 'sign' from heaven, regarding this demand as an indication of the corruption and perversity of those who made it. 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of Jonah. For even as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of man be to this generation. . . . The men of Nineveh shall stand up in the judgment with this generation, and shall con-



demn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here.' <sup>2</sup> Here one might say that Jesus had no more regard for miracles than modern men of science have. What he had for his fellow men was preaching and loving services.

What Jesus preached was not dogmas: it was the more abundant life — *being* and *doing*. Not wait, but 'seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.' With a gentle, sympathetic touch, he said to the sick man, 'Arise and walk.' To the sinful woman, 'Go thy way; henceforth sin no more.' To the young man who was gratified to know that the two greatest commandments were those which enjoined love to God and love to man, Jesus said, 'This do, and thou shalt live.' Again, in the Sermon on the Mount, he says: 'Forgive if you would be forgiven. . . . Do to others as ye would that they should do unto you. . . . Have faith; love and serve; pray and give alms, but not in order to be seen of men.' As a full-grown son of God, Jesus assured his lesser brethren that if they would use their spiritual gifts, they also would realize their divine sonship and become co-workers with the Father, and unconquerable by any inward or outward evil.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 11:29-32.

Samuel Longfellow gives Jesus' thought a moving expression in the simple but beautiful hymn:

Go forth to life, O child of earth!  
Still mindful of thy heavenly birth:  
Thou art not here for ease or sin,  
But manhood's noble crown to win.

Though passion's fires are in thy soul,  
Thy spirit can their flames control;  
Though tempters strong beset thy way,  
Thy spirit is more strong than they.

Go on from innocence of youth  
To manly pureness, manly truth:  
God's angels still are near to save,  
And God himself doth help the brave.

Then forth to life, O child of earth!  
Be worthy of thy heavenly birth!  
For noble service thou art here;  
Thy brothers help, thy God revere!

Did Jesus fail? He failed with his own people, or rather they did fail to understand him. His real victory came after his death: for he spoke not only to the Jews of his generation, but to the ages. It was the great and ineradicable impression he made upon his disciples — which put new life and courage in

them — that gave the Christian movement its start. But for that reawakening, the Twelve would have returned to their humble occupations, and Paul remained an orthodox Jew — zealous of the Law — instead of becoming ‘an apostle of Christ Jesus.’

Yes, Jesus spoke to the ages, and he still speaks. The ages, in which his human personality, his loving character, and his simple theology were obscured by mythical, intricate theologies, were ages in which absolutism — with its ‘infallible’ dogmas — flourished in both Church and State. The common people were made utterly dependent upon the mercy — if any — of their rulers. This world in which they were (in a modern phrase) only ‘yes men’ had no allurements for them to ‘go forth to life.’ Life in this sinful world seemed not worth the living, and threatened damnation hereafter. ‘The Kingdom of God is within you’ was not what the people were taught, but that all men are ‘conceived in sin, and born in iniquity.’ Only belief in a Redeemer-Lord and the worship of the Trinity in Unity made salvation from eternal suffering sure. The one and only Redeemer was the Christ of the ‘holy’ ecclesiastical councils.

In connection with the foregoing, I will

quote the section of the Athanasian Creed which presents the doctrine of the Trinity and its saving grace, in a nutshell. I recall that a mathematician — after hearing me recite that section in a sermon — said to me with a broad smile: 'Can you explain this thing? To me it is an arithmetical puzzle.' All I could say to him was, 'It is so also to me.' Here is the said section:

The Father is made of none; neither created; nor begotten.

The Son is of the Father alone: nor made, nor created, but begotten.

The Holy Ghost is of the Father and the Son: not made, neither created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

Thus there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.

And in this Trinity none is before or after another: none is greater or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal together, and coequal.

So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshiped.

He therefore that will be saved, must think of the Trinity.\*

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\* Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III, p. 693.

But 'the old order changeth, yielding place to new.' The sixteenth century was the dawn of a new age. Then the heralds of democracy began to form their ranks; Protestantism was born, and Jesus' Unitarianism reborn. The progress of this theology has been so steady that the nineteenth century saw Unitarian views widely spread among the Trinitarian churches: and the originally small Unitarian leaven continues to leaven the great lump.

Last year I happened to meet a Catholic priest at a summer resort. Notwithstanding the fact that he was an orthodox of the orthodox, and I a heretic of the heretics, the occasion proved a pleasant one to both of us. During the week we spent together, we entered into many discussions; first of religion in general, and then Catholicism and Protestantism — Trinitarian and Unitarian.

Once I asked him his opinion of a possible reunion of the Protestant bodies with the mother Church. His answer was, 'How could the Church favor such a thing, while the Protestant denominations are fast becoming Unitarians?' He smiled when I said, 'We Unitarians bless the Lord for that, and hope and pray that Rome will not indefinitely oppose our theology.'

Yes, Protestantism is fast becoming Unitarian, and, as fast, the old orthodoxy is declining. In proportion, Jesus of Nazareth is increasing, and the supernatural Christ of the ecclesiastical Councils, of blessed memory, is decreasing.

In this democratic, scientific age — with its hosts of free schools and universities — the doctrines of a triune God, of eternal hell-fire, and of miraculous salvation are very little, if any, preached in evangelical churches: and, as little questioning would reveal, less believed by millions of their laity. The precious thought that man can and must work out his own salvation in this world, and not beg for it from a higher power, prevails. It is certain that there is no free-lunch counter in this universe, and as certain that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'

The Christ of Unitarianism is Jesus of Nazareth: our brother and guide. Looking through the few apertures which his recorded life opens to us into that vaster unrecorded life, we see in his personality a manifestation of the divine: 'full of grace and truth.' Jesus' personality towers high above, and illuminates his words and deeds. And it is that uncomprehended soul — which formed such close

fellowship with the Controller of Destiny that he knew Him as a loving Father — that fascinates and commands.

It is Jesus' personality and the personalities of those who grew into his likeness — through these nineteen centuries — that give the Christian message concreteness and significance. He may — as some allege — have borrowed from former generations all the precepts he taught; yet history amply sustains the fact that as a borrower the Nazarene had the matchless selective genius. He not only knew how and what to borrow, but could so vitalize and fuse his borrowings together and so charge them with divine enthusiasm as to make their march through the centuries irresistible.

Jesus' firm faith in God, and in his fellow men, his befriending the friendless and giving hope to the hopeless, the sacrificial adventures of his love, even among the humblest, and his patience and his peace charm the modern mind. This is why the liberals reverently accept the leadership of Jesus and deeply feel the inspiration of his example, which lightens the burdens of life for all those who walk the way of life with him.

All this is represented by Washington Gladden, in his treasured hymn in which he con-

templates, humbly, reverently, prayerfully, Jesus' personality and example, and expresses his own eager desire to be led by him:

O Master, let me walk with thee  
In lowly paths of service free;  
Tell me thy secret; help me bear  
The strain of toil, the fret of care.

Help me the slow of heart to move  
By some clear, winning words of love;  
Teach me the wayward feet to stay,  
And guide them in the homeward way.

Teach me thy patience; still with thee  
In closer, dearer company,  
In work that keeps faith sweet and strong,  
In trust that triumphs over wrong;

In hope that sends a shining ray  
Far down the future's broadening way;  
In peace that only thou canst give —  
With thee, O Master, let me live!

What a priceless meditation such a hymn is with which to open each day, as a true follower of Jesus, in thought and deed.

And I can find no better, no more inclusive bond of fellowship for any church than the following, which is generally adopted by the Unitarian churches: 'In the freedom of the truth and in the spirit of Jesus, we unite for



the worship of God and the service of man. Here there is no dogma and no creed, but a voluntary resolve to follow the Master in worship and service.

Jesus is our supreme spiritual Guide: the first among many brethren. Our reverence for him is also reverence for what is noblest in ourselves. Like the sound of music to a marching army is the inspiration of his career to the spiritual teachers of our own day. It comes to us across the centuries both as a challenge and a reinforcement to

Strengthen the wavering line,  
'Stablish, continue our march,  
On, to the bound of the waste;  
On, to the City of God.

THE END











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